Complex Emergencies And USAID's Humanitarian Response

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Overview

In 1998 some 32 million people needed humanitarian assistance because they were caught up in complex emergencies (armed conflicts or civil wars). That same year, the United States spent $898 million on humanitarian assistance. This amount represented 10.2 percent of official development assistance and was more than triple the amount spent on humanitarian assistance in 1990.

Given the level of funding and the number of people involved, it's reasonable to ask, Just how effective was this emergency assistance? Did it save lives and alleviate suffering? Did it affect social tensions and political hostilities? Did it contribute to long-term economic development?

In 1998–99, teams from USAID's Center for Development Information and Evaluation (CDIE) visited three countries—Haiti, Mozambique, and Rwanda—to explore those questions. The teams interviewed beneficiaries (mostly refugees or internally displaced persons) and a broad range of experts who had managed or carried out emergency assistance programs. Findings from those field trips, and to a lesser extent from evaluations in other countries, are detailed in the Assessment Report *Complex Humanitarian Emergencies and USAID's Humanitarian Response* (PN–ACG–605). This Highlights summarizes that evaluation synthesis.

The evaluation does not produce statistical proof of impact but is rather an interpretation of the links between USAID intervention and various effects. A more scientific approach is rarely feasible, given the political and violent character of complex emergencies. Compounding the difficulty are the multiple players involved (various U.S. government agencies, other bilateral and multilateral development agencies, nongovernmental and private voluntary organizations, and the host country) and the different goals sought (relief only or rehabilitation and economic development as well).

It should surprise no one that humanitarian assistance has been subjected to less monitoring and evaluation than development assistance. This study aims to narrow the gap. By assessing the impact of humanitarian assistance on vulnerable populations, CDIE hopes to shed light on the relationship between emergency assistance and political and development processes. It also hopes to help formulate more effective policies and interventions in response to complex emergencies.

Three Countries, Three Epochs of Violence

Although the term "complex emergency" is relatively new in the American lexicon, the so-named man-made events—characterized often by war, famine, a breakdown of institutions and governance, and massive population displacements—are not. What causes complex emergencies? And what humanitarian tools has USAID used to alleviate the widespread suffering?

In all three case-study countries, poverty was a factor. Distribution of wealth was skewed in the three countries, and civilians in all suffered widespread human rights abuses. Beyond that, each country's context is different, as are USAID's subsequent humanitarian responses.

Haiti

Throughout Haiti's 200-year history, oppressive governments have favored the rich over the poor. So it is little wonder that predatory governance was the principal cause of Haiti's complex emergency. A military coup in 1991 led to widespread political repression and human rights violations. This in turn precipitated a series of UN sanctions, including a U.S.–led international embargo.

By September 1994, an estimated 300,000 Haitians had been displaced internally; 60,000 to 70,000 more had become refugees (some as the highly publicized "boat people"); thousands had fled across the border to the Dominican Republic; and 4,000 had been killed. Gross domestic product had fallen by 35 percent, and inflation had risen to 50 percent. An estimated 143,000 jobs in the private sector had vanished.

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As expected, the need for humanitarian assistance increased. USAID increased Haiti's food aid by 60 percent to $24.6 million in 1994. In 1995, food aid was increased by 37 percent more. At this peak, the international community was feeding 1.3 million people, or one out of seven Haitians, each day. It was also providing most of the country's health services.

USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance spent $5.4 million primarily for the distribution of essential drugs and medical and agricultural supplies. OFDA also supported efforts to purify drinking water throughout Haiti, to purchase equipment for the Port-au-Prince municipal water system, and to buy fuel needed to transport emergency assistance to beneficiaries.

The Pan American Development Foundation carried out a $38 million jobs-creation project. USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives provided $17.3 million in 1994–95 to fund demobilization of the armed forces and more than 1,900 microprojects designed to bridge the gap between relief and development. These included the building of schools, roads, and bridges as well as organizing literacy, sanitation, and reforestation activities.

Mozambique

Mozambique's 10-year war for independence ended in 1975, but the country's problems were far from over. The Marxist-leaning Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (Frelimo), the insurgent group that had fought for independence, took control of a country with a highly dualistic economy and few schools, health centers, or other public facilities. Most Portuguese and many skilled Mozambicans fled after the war. The fledgling government was vulnerable to attacks by the Mozambican National Resistance (Renamo), formed by white Rhodesian military officers who opposed the new regime. Renamo cut railway and power lines, wiped out roads and bridges, and sabotaged oil-storage depots.

The result was civil war fought largely with small arms and land mines and supported on both sides by foreign countries. Both armies terrorized the rural population by seizing food and killing people. As many as 8 million people in a country of 16 million were affected; most fled to neighboring countries or moved to areas of relative safety within Mozambique. In 1986 the economy hit bottom. Annual per capita income was $80, lowest in the world; growth of gross national product was a negative 2.3 percent; and inflation was 41 percent.

During 1988–91, as the civil war escalated, USAID assistance doubled to an average of $100 million a year. In 1992, during the final throes of the war, assistance doubled again, to $200 million

annually. During 1993–95, after peace accords were signed in 1992, U.S. assistance averaged $125 million a year. It included both food aid and development components: resettlement packages (food, seed, farming tools, household goods), support for elections and civic education, demobilization of the two armies, and mine clearance. During 1996–97, USAID assistance dropped to about $50 million a year, its pre–civil war level. The mission resumed its emphasis on development.

Rwanda

During April–July 1994, the Rwandan government and many Hutu (the ethnic majority) extremists massacred more than 800,000 people. The genocide left three fourths of the country's Tutsi (the ethnic minority) dead and was meant to prevent the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front from seizing power. Based in Uganda, the RPF had tried to topple the Hutu-dominated government in 1990 and again in 1993. During 1990–93, the proportion of Rwanda's population living in poverty increased from 40 percent to 70 percent, a factor that undoubtedly helped set the stage for the 1994 genocide.

> ***'Both Hutu and Tutsi have used violence as part of a winner-take-all mentality that has dominated Rwanda's governments during the colonial and postcolonial periods. The violence benefits a tiny elite at the expense of the poor majority.'***

Conditions in Rwanda remained tense and unstable throughout 1995 and 1996. The economic picture continued to worsen, and poverty levels rose. For its part, USAID provided food and other types of emergency assistance, which in 1997 totaled $118 million. Most of these funds and the $56 million spent in 1998 were for food commodities—beans, cornmeal, and vegetable oil—for the genocide survivors. The Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance provided potable water and sanitation and health services as well as emergency food aid along the route of returning refugees. OFDA also provided seed, tools, and food rations to 50,000 vulnerable farm families. Other efforts to jump-start agricultural production included assisting 90,000 families for one month following repatriation and providing $26 million to fund rapid-impact activities, including a shelter program for some of the 1.3 million returning refugees. The Office of Transition Initiatives funded a program to educate local leadership and support local democratic processes.

By 1999 the Rwandan Patriotic Front had secured stable borders around its territory. The bulk of the population in exile or refugee camps had returned home. Today, however, some killing continues. The Agency is providing both humanitarian and development assistance in the northwest part of the country, where a small group of Hutu extremists are determined to finish their work of genocide.

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The Effects of Humanitarian Aid

The authors examined the effects of U.S. assistance in Haiti, Mozambique, and Rwanda from three perspectives: humanitarian, political, and economic.

Haiti

Humanitarian Effects

Efforts to target Haiti's vulnerable populations generally worked well. There is quantitative evidence that emergency food relief alleviated the embargo's effect on Haiti's historically high malnutrition rates.

The jobs-creation project implemented during 1993–96 to offset the embargo's economic pressures created almost half a million man-months of short-term employment (20 percent was for women). Another USAID-funded project supported agricultural production and reduced decap-

italization of farm households. Some 13,000 farming households and 47 farmers associations took part in the project, which loaned funds to farmers for seed and fertilizer and sold them tools at half price.

Political Effects

Food aid became a new source of tension among local groups connected to political factions. Some municipal mayors used their access to food aid for personal or political gain. Occasionally, food supplies were hijacked, and fighting erupted among beneficiaries. Trouble in some neighborhoods, such as Cité Jasmin in Port-au-Prince, forced workers to cease food distribution. However, through regular monitoring, convoy protection, and timely adjustment of stocking and distribution methods, leakage and diversion were estimated at less than 10 percent.

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The notion that food aid rarely escapes having political consequences (though given without a political agenda) is particularly germane in the case of Haiti. Because food aid was exempted from the embargo, it may have dampened public pressure that otherwise might have risen to uncontrollable levels against the regime. Working at cross-purposes with the policy of economic isolation, humanitarian aid may, in fact, have delayed intervention by external forces, intervention that finally proved necessary to remove the Haitian military from power.

Economic Effects

The Agency's emergency assistance supported the Haitian economy in two main ways: employment generation and agricultural production. In addition, the Office of Transition Initiatives provided small grants to various organizations to fund numerous microprojects.

Emergency assistance programs generally are designed with only incidental links to economic development, and Haiti's case was no exception. The employment activities provided short-term benefits but not permanent, off-farm sources of income. Laborers were hired to repair roads, irrigation canals, and soil conservation barriers. But because maintenance and long-term sustainability of the infrastructure was not an objective, over time the infrastructure has deteriorated. To make more durable infrastructure, materials would have been needed, and that may have compromised the primary objective of generating employment. Consequently, humanitarian aid had minimal developmental impact. Although it's desirable to incorporate long-term development objectives when designing short-term emergency responses, the Haiti experience highlights the difficulty of doing both well.

As for agricultural relief, the program loaned funds to farmers for seed and fertilizer and sold tools at half price, activities that helped no more than 10 percent of all Haiti's farmers. For those beneficiaries, though, incomes and livelihoods were maintained, and dependency on short-term relief was reduced.

Programs of the Office of Transition Initiatives often inject cash or commodities into an economy to meet people's most pressing needs quickly. Such programs, meant to bridge the gap between short-term relief and long-term development, worked well in Haiti. Over a 27-month period during 1994–96, OTI funded 1,900 microprojects that ranged from rehabilitating and constructing schools, roads, markets, canals, and bridges to implementing literacy, public health, sanitation, reforestation, and civic education activities. The program emphasized installation more than maintenance; still, a mid-term evaluation reads, "There is absolutely no doubt that this program has had unprecedented success in mobilizing highly valued resources to tens of thousands of needy beneficiaries all over Haiti."

Mozambique

Humanitarian Effects

The United States was Mozambique's major donor during its complex humanitarian emergency, contributing a total of $636 million during 1987–95. Despite the level of aid, the evaluation team could find no reliable quantitative data to assess the humanitarian impact of U.S. emergency assistance. Estimated nationwide rates of malnutrition, mortality, and morbidity showed some improvement, first in the late 1980s and then again in 1994. Though it was impossible to attribute these improvements to emergency assistance, there was consensus among donors, beneficiaries, relief workers, and Mozambican government officials that many more people would have suffered and died without the food aid. But just *how* many people is impossible to estimate.

> ***'Expatriates and Mozambicans alike consistently blame military assistance provided by the Soviet Union (to Frelimo) and by South Africa (to Renamo) for prolonging the war. When the civil war ended in 1992, it was primarily because foreign military support ended.'***

Mozambicans who fled to nearby countries generally received adequate food and medical care once they reached the refugee camps. By contrast, those who were internally displaced often received insufficient and irregular supplies. This was especially true among people aided by the Mozambican government. Those people reported that everybody was hungry during the war years. And harassment from Renamo or Frelimo was all too common. People from several villages said they lost their food aid to Frelimo by day and to Renamo by night. The years of heavy fighting (1987–92) were the most difficult. After signing of the 1992 peace accords, people returned home. Resettlement packages (food, tools, services) were provided through 1995. This final stage of the emergency was the smoothest.

Political Effects

It wasn't until the late 1980s when the Frelimo government had abandoned most of its socialist ideology and initiated a program of market-based economic reforms (supported by USAID and the World Bank) that the United States became a serious donor in Mozambique. And then, the United States targeted its assistance to internally displaced persons in Frelimo-controlled territories. The only U.S. assistance provided to Renamo-controlled populations was supplied indirectly through the International Committee of the Red Cross.

As in Haiti, food aid in Mozambique was sometimes politicized. Both Frelimo and Renamo soldiers tried to steal food by intimidating relief workers and hijacking trucks. Both militaries looted distribution points in rural villages. Obviously, the aid helped support the military forces to some extent. But did it prolong the civil war? Expatriates and Mozambicans alike consistently blame military assistance provided by the Soviet Union (to Frelimo) and by South Africa (to Renamo) for that. When the civil war ended in 1992, it was primarily because foreign military support ended.

Economic Effects

The Agency shifted its priority from humanitarian assistance to development assistance after the end of Mozambique's civil war. It set out with two objectives: to restart the rural economy and to restart subsistence agriculture. Both efforts largely succeeded.

Farmers received seeds, tools, and other assistance to help them resume agricultural production and to reduce their dependence on food aid. (Recapitalizing farms cost less than $50 per household.) USAID gradually stopped providing food relief and began supporting food-for-work projects. To help break the dependency mentality, the program supported labor-intensive rural road construction and rehabilitation and construction of schools and health clinics as well as small-scale irrigation projects. The quality of the work was satisfactory, though maintenance was questionable. As eco-

nomic recovery continued, the food-for-work projects evolved into cash-for-work projects. These helped create sustainable market mechanisms for supplying food and other consumer goods.

USAID and the World Bank supported efforts to reduce state control of markets and prices and to promote privatization of state-owned enterprises. These measures helped speed the growth of small markets and encouraged refugees and internally displaced persons to resettle. The Agency also funded a commodity import program that supplied imports needed to support economic liberalization. Those initiatives along with the program to demine and rehabilitate roads helped open up trade in rural areas.

Rwanda

Humanitarian Effects

Some 1.3 million refugees were repatriated to Rwanda in late 1996 and early 1997. Undoubtedly, massive starvation and even more human suffering would have occurred without substantial U.S. emergency food aid. But as it was in Mozambique, the effect of the aid in Rwanda proved difficult to quantify owing to lack of data.

Targeting beneficiaries in Rwanda was especially problematic. Poor monitoring and minimal security meant that food and other relief supplies were often diverted. It was painfully obvious that the perpetrators of human rights abuses and genocide were fed and assisted in the camps. Most relief workers stayed, recognizing the need to assist the vast population of refugees, even if that meant assisting people guilty of crimes against humanity. But some donors, believing they had no alternative, left the camps and suspended services. Many experts believe that more food aid was misappropriated in Rwanda than is usual in emergency situations.

Political Effects

The mixing in camps of legitimate refugees with people guilty of genocide proved an unresolvable quandary for the international humanitarian community. Wanting to maintain neutrality without military intervention, most donors did nothing. This strategy (or lack of strategy) gave the Hutu extremists in the refugee camps a false sense of enhanced legitimacy. They took this opportunity to regroup, rearm, and revitalize themselves—all in the relative safety of the camps.

In October 1996, the American ambassador to the United Nations, Bill Richardson, stated: "The failure of the international community to respond adequately to both genocide and the subsequent mixing of genocidal killers with the legitimate refugee population in the former eastern Zaire only served to prolong the crisis." That same year, USAID stopped providing food aid to the World Food Program for use in the camps. The idea of providing humanitarian aid to the planners and implementers of genocide was seen as inconsistent with the stated objectives of humanitarian aid. By March 1999, many services had ground to a halt.

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Economic Effects

The Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance was reportedly successful in distributing seeds and tools to almost every region of Rwanda in 1995 and 1996. Agricultural experts from various research centers alerted donors to the importance of planting adapted seed in the country's various microclimates. Because of this, more appropriate seed and rootstock from seed banks (including many local seed banks) were used than otherwise would have been the case. In addition, food-for-work programs were carried out to reclaim wet lowland farming areas and to improve terracing and land productivity.

Early on, the Rwandan government (as distinct from nongovernmental organizations) claimed control of relief and development programs. USAID was an early and strong supporter of these efforts and helped strengthen the government's capacity in

many ways. These included funding the Rwandan-initiated International Genocide Conference in 1995, training court clerks in the Ministry of Justice, helping the Ministry of Health decentralize and establish an emergency response unit, and providing basic equipment to justice, health, interior, and several other ministries.

Activities funded by the Office of Transition Initiatives supported decentralization and education of local leadership. The Women in Transition Program, which has reached more than 160,000 women, encourages commercial interaction among different ethnic groups. It also supports an increasing number of women farmers. Another initiative supports election education. Such development-related activities were designed to meet immediate needs while preparing for follow-up programs.

Lessons and Recommendations

1. Emergency assistance programs funded by USAID and implemented by American nongovernmental organizations save lives. They appear to deliver sufficient assistance to ensure the survival of a country's vulnerable poor, though inadequate monitoring makes it difficult to quantify results. Without massive infusions of predominately U.S. emergency assistance, more Haitians would have fled the country seeking refuge in the United States. Massive starvation and human suffering would have occurred in Mozambique and Rwanda. Emergency assistance clearly helped save lives and alleviate suffering. However, except in Haiti, data collection and monitoring were not done (or were done poorly), so it is difficult to quantify results.

Baseline data for socioeconomic indicators (e.g., malnutrition rates, food prices, population displacement) can help managers identify appropriate kinds of emergency relief, target its distribution, and subsequently measure and evaluate its effectiveness. Close monitoring enhances donor coordination and is essential for assessing aid needs, avoiding work at cross-purposes, identifying recipient groups no longer needing emergency aid, shifting relief to reconstruction and development, and designing and adjusting economic policies.

Recommendation. Establish a central monitoring and data-collection unit to serve all donors during the early weeks of a complex emergency.

2. Effective distribution of emergency assistance requires organization and control to limit theft, minimize abuse, guard against political manipulation, and protect beneficiaries. NGOs were mainly in charge of relief distribution in Haiti. They addressed these problems by stocking and distributing food aid in neutral settings (schools, factory yards), using ration cards to track the receipt of food aid, and having agency personnel and occasionally police present to monitor distribution. These measures limited diversion to less than 10 percent and helped reduce violence.

In Mozambique the government emergency relief agency lacked the technical expertise to plan, organize, and manage the distribution of massive supplies of relief aid. Leakage was typically 30 percent, and at one point 50 percent was lost, stolen, or diverted. In response, donors, NGOs, and the private sector took over much of the distribution, and losses dropped to under 5 percent. In camps in Tanzania and Zaire, more food aid was supplied than was necessary, and more than usual was misappropriated. Some NGOs suspended their operations because they knew they were assisting people guilty of crimes against humanity.

Recommendation. Decisions to continue, withdraw, or modify aid distribution should be made as a matter of deliberate policy on a regular basis by each individual donor.

3. Emergency assistance can help maintain social calm and mitigate political instability. Conversely, it can exacerbate political tensions. Rarely is it politically neutral. In Haiti, food aid reduced the probability of food riots during a period of political and economic stress. It may have had a dampening effect on political tensions; but it also may have resulted in a political status quo that enabled the de facto military regime to stay in power longer. In Mozambique, external military assistance provided by the Soviet Union and by South Africa fueled the war. Food aid, by comparison, had relatively little effect on the country's political dynamics, although food diverted to soldiers may

have contributed to the war effort. In Rwanda, genocidal killers were mixed with legitimate refugees in camps, and both benefited from humanitarian assistance.

Recommendation. Be alert to potential undesirable political or social effects that relief aid may cause.

4. Emergency assistance that enables people to protect their livelihoods (as well as meet immediate needs) helps reduce dependency and contributes to long-term economic development. Generally, the longer encampment or temporary foreign residence lasts, the less willing refugees are to return home. A combination of "push" factors (such as terminating free food distribution) and "pull" factors (such as including seeds and tools in resettlement packages) is likely to accelerate the repatriation process. Food-for-work and cash-for-work programs also support economic growth by creating short-term jobs and rehabilitating infrastructure.

But for reasons of political and bureaucratic self-interest, local governments may not remove from the rolls those no longer needing relief. Therefore, donors must monitor each situation closely, recognizing that both relief and development assistance may be needed if some areas remain in emergency status while others stabilize more quickly. After populations have been repatriated and are settled, the agricultural base begins to be reestablished, dependency on free food distribution drops, and long-run food security is enhanced.

Recommendation. Give refugees incentives to return home and impose disincentives on those remaining outside their country of origin.

5. Complex emergencies seriously weaken the capacity of governments to provide basic public services. Economic recovery requires a cadre of high-level technocrats with both management and conceptual skills, especially in macroeconomic and sectoral policy formulation. Such skills are likely to be in short supply, especially if preconflict professionals and the intelligentsia were targeted for deliberate elimination or have permanently left the country. Recovery also needs to dovetail with postconflict economic realities. Job training is fruitless if unemployment in the depressed economy remains high. Training is especially critical for demobilized soldiers who, unless they become employed, tend to turn to destabilizing criminal activity.

Recommendation. Train technocrats to manage the postconflict economic transition, and train others (particularly demobilized soldiers) in skills for which there is a demand.

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These lessons and recommendations are useful as far as they go. But in the first instance, one overriding conclusion needs to be stated. It is this: however one assesses the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance, it is far better to *prevent* complex emergencies from occurring in the first place than it is to respond to victims' needs afterward.

This Highlights, by Lynda DeWitt of Conwal Incorporated, summarizes the findings of Program and Operations Assessment Report No. 27, Complex Humanitarian Emergencies and USAID's Humanitarian Response *(PN–ACG–605), by Donald G. McClelland, of CDIE, and others. This report and other CDIE publications can be ordered from USAID's Development Experience Clearinghouse, 1611 North Kent Street, Suite 200, Arlington, VA 22209; telephone (703) 351–4006; fax (703) 351–4039; e-mail docorder@dec.cdie.org. To access from the Internet, key in www.usaid.gov. Click on Partner Resources, then on USAID Evaluation Publications.*